The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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PACIFIC SCHOOL
OF RELIGION

No. 110 DECEMBER 3RD, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

A letter from one of our members raises a fundamental question in regard to the whole idea of "Planning." After expressing his pleasure that attention has again been directed to Professor Mannheim's *Man and Society*, which he regards as the most valuable work of constructive thinking that has appeared since the war began, he goes on to discuss the relation between plan and pattern. I give the gist of what he says:

PATTERN AND PLAN

The necessity for planning is poignantly plain. But it is equally plain that wrong planning would be a calamity. Planning can lead only to disaster, if it is the arbitrary product of finite minds, and is not rooted in a vital *pattern* of life and thought. Pattern is something that we *find*. It already exists in the sphere of Being. For the secularist it emerges from the flux of life; for the Christian it proceeds from God. But in either case pattern, in contrast with plan, is something that emerges from being, not something imposed by man. Each epoch of history begets its own pattern of thought, feeling and behaviour. What is meant by pattern in this connection is not so much the eternal pattern to which in the end all things must conform, but the particular pattern which the historical situation of our time requires that we should apprehend and realise. To-day it is the pattern, rather than the plan, of life that we lack.

The old pattern is everywhere in dissolution. The new pattern has not yet disclosed itself. Therefore all planning, which has not consciously an interim character is dangerous. We all tend to-day to plan frenziedly, like ants whose heap has been violently disturbed. But very few are seeking with equal intensity to discover the pattern without which all plans are vain. To apprehend pattern demands a different kind of approach, capacity and technique from those that are needed to elaborate plans. The latter task requires activity, industry, ingenuity, execution ; the former demands passivity, sensitivity, contemplation, intuition. An age of scientific specialization has brought the one mode to an unparalleled point of efficiency; the other has become almost a lost art. The primary and urgent need is for a renewed cultivation of the attitude and qualities which are capable of apprehending pattern.

You will see at once how important this is, and how much we need to be reminded of it. But while the distinction between pattern and plan is fundamental, there is no need to set the two in opposition. We must wait and listen for the new pattern to be revealed. But this is not an excuse for postponing measures of planning which have become an urgent necessity, if our society is to survive. The planning which has to be undertaken without delay may be compared to the setting up of traffic lights, the absence of which would lead to chaos. There are, in fact, two opposite dangers into which we may fall, and either may prove fatal. The one is that of dealing with the situation at too superficial a level, so that its true meaning is missed. The other is of escaping into a world of contemplation at the price of evading the immediate necessities, tasks and responsibilities of the present. We have to work out our own salvation, as the apostle says, *because* it is God who is working in us.

Moreover, even in the effort to apprehend pattern there is a place for planning. The revelation of pattern is a matter of grace. But the gift comes to those who search diligently and rightly. Rational thinking has its part to play, if only in the removal of obstacles.

PLANNING AND PERSONS

The Supplement this week by the Dean of St. John's College, Cambridge, opens up another question that has a bearing on planning. If we want to plan for a society based on freedom we have to face the fundamental problem whether there are enough people who are capable of making it work. That is the question with which Mr. Raven is concerned. His way of approaching it seems to me to have great value. Religion to many is full of perplexities, but the difference between the life which is self-centred and that which has its centre in the Other is a plain fact of experience and has to do directly with the choices of every day. When I got Mr. Raven's letter, I asked him whether he could tell me rather more fully how things worked out in practice and he sent me a further letter, which forms the second part of the Supplement.

THE NEWS-LETTER

With C.N-L. No. 104 over 2,000 subscriptions to the News-Letter fell due. We naturally felt some concern as to the proportion who would renew their subscriptions. We hardly expected that the proportion of renewals would reach, as it has done, almost 90 per cent., and that 90 per cent. of those who renewed would subscribe for a whole year. Our members could not have given a more convincing proof of their interest and loyalty.

Three weeks ago we enclosed with the News-Letter a special Christmas Gift form. Extra copies of this can be had on application. We have already had a substantial number of gift subscriptions, and shall be glad if those who wish to make the News-Letter a Christmas present to friends will let us have their orders without delay, so that we can arrange to start the subscription with the issue of December 17th.

The fourth volume of the Christian News-Letter (Nos. 79-104) is now being bound and we hope to have it on sale before Christmas. Will members who wish to have their own copies bound please let us have them immediately; the packet must be dispatched from this office to the binders early next week.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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DECEMBER 3RD 1941

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Supplement to C.N-L. No. 110

FREE MEN FOR A FREE SOCIETY

MY DEAR OLDHAM,

At the present time a great many people, I believe, are coming to feel more or less vaguely that the teaching of Christ does hold out a hope of a solution of the present problems. Yet the results so far achieved by the various Christian bodies scarcely appear to them to bear out this hope. The Churches themselves are well aware of this; but in the absence of any very constructive idea how to remedy it, they console themselves by directing their energies to the task of applying Christian principles to the various spheres of practical life, such as economics, politics, social problems or education. All these are of great importance and Christianity is unquestionably vitally concerned in them. But we shall meet only with frustration if we attempt to solve those problems without having first faced the primary demand which Christianity makes. For Christianity is the power-house which alone can provide the necessary motive and energy, if we are to reorganise the life of the individual and the community alike in accordance with the Christian Gospel.

The various forms of Utopia which have been propounded of recent years illustrate this. One and all break on the same rock. They all assume that humanity will be prepared voluntarily to sacrifice personal advantage for the sake of the common good. By nature man tends to look first to his own interests; he fixes his eyes on some self-centred goal—wealth, comfort, power, reputation, whatever it may be—and regulates his conduct accordingly. To reject those interests for the sake of others demands a change of heart so radical that many reject it as impracticable. "You cannot change human nature" is the commonest of common-places.

THE TRUE CENTRE

Yet this change of heart, tremendous as it is, is a perfectly natural one, requiring no quality which is not innate in man from the beginning. Indeed, it and it alone can lead to the full development of his true nature. If man is prone naturally to be self-centred, he is no less naturally prone to fall in love. He gives himself to some person or cause outside himself. At once self and the interests of self cease to concern him; he rules his actions by the interests of the friend or cause to whom he has given himself; he uses all the capacities he possesses in conformity with this, and is eager to make any sacrifice for it, even, if necessary, the supreme sacrifice of life itself.

This twofold nature of man is at the basis of Christ's teaching. The self-centred tendency is sin; whatever is done from that motive, whether socially reprehensible or not, is still sinful in God's eyes. The other-centred tendency is the way of God. And what human love does for each one of us in our relations with a single limited object, that Christ makes possible for us throughout the whole range of our activities. In human love we are other-centred only in such actions as affect the object of our love; in other spheres we remain self-centred. But Christ is in everything, His Spirit permeates the universe; there is no sphere outside of Him. The character we admire in our friend is the image, given us by God, of the character of the perfect man, Jesus Christ; the beauties of nature that inspire us are the God-given reflections of the beauty of God, who made them and in the person of Christ rejoiced in them; the joy of intellectual truth is the manifestation of Him who was himself the Truth. Christ, perfect God and perfect Man, alone satisfies every side of our nature, so that for love of Him we can turn utterly from the way of self to the way of love. To be truly other-centred, we *must* become Christ-centred.

But this is not all. Christ's will for us is

that we should help all men to unite in loving Him. As we put Christ in the centre of our lives, we learn to see in Him the whole mass of those who have responded or can respond to His love; He embodies in Himself the community of all mankind, one in His love. Christianity knows nothing of individualistic religion; it is not a series of private friendships with Christ. He is the common friend of all; we are the community of His friends. The power of this is far greater than the sum of individual friendships. This becomes obvious in times of imminent danger. All are animated by a common devotion to a common cause. Mutual suspicion gives way to confidence and trust. All share the common danger. Each is prepared to face whatever may come to him. Each is ready to respond to any call for help. There is no sense of injustice at the inequalities of suffering. The power of the community spirit, so long as the cause satisfies, is invincible.

This was the primary meaning of the Church as Christ founded it, the secret of its early power. The disciples had learnt through the years of the earthly ministry to know and love their Master. After His ascension they had found His Spirit within their hearts, closer than ever before; His work became the one all-absorbing passion of their lives. They had no room for fear, for to suffer was to share His sufferings and to die was to draw yet closer to Him. Living each moment in the conscious presence of His love, seeing His presence in each other, they were linked together with Him in an indissoluble community; and they spread round them an atmosphere of loving sympathy and joyful confidence which no opposition could deny, no power of self-interest withstand. For it was the power of Christ's Spirit working in and through them.

LOVE AS GOD'S GIFT

The reality of that power is proved abundantly in the history of the first centuries of the Church; but it urgently needs to be re-emphasised to-day. Christian terminology has become so familiar to us that it has tended largely to lose its meaning. It is not easy for us to recover the full implications of words which we have repeated so often that they have become little more than empty phrases. Moreover in these days we have come to regard man as more and more self-sufficient, independent of God, capable by his own efforts of controlling the world's destiny. Yet in the sphere of love man is nowhere in control; he cannot even make himself love anyone. Love is and remains the gift of God. We can prepare ourselves for that gift, we can co-operate with God in using it; or we can reject it when offered; but we cannot create a man-made substitute for it. Yet few of us would deny that our friendships and our enmities have played the biggest part in the formation of our characters. The active help and sympathy of a friend influences us far more than the most terrific external upheavals. God's influence on man is not reduced if we see it not in the catastrophic phenomena of nature but in the quiet sympathy of a loving friend.

The failure to recognise this is at the root of much of the weakness of organised religion to-day. We are constantly striving to *make* ourselves and others Christians by our own efforts; we leave no room for the working of the Holy Spirit in our feverish attempts to reach to God in our own strength and to enforce on others whatever of truth we may have glimpsed ourselves. What makes no appeal to us, we only too often dismiss scornfully as useless or even worse; yet often the defects in our own capabilities are to blame. That we are unmusical, for example, is no reason to belittle the religious possibilities of music; if we are lacking in artistic appreciation, we have no right to deny the value of colour and ritual and artistry as means to lead to God. Christ's character has many sides to it; if we are to hope to get any complete picture of it, we can do so only by sharing together the different glimpses that each of us has discovered. Variations in our methods of approach to Him and diversities in the characteristics we find in Him, far from being causes of division threatening to break the unity of the fellowship based on common loyalty and devotion to our common Leader and Friend, should rather be a matter for rejoicing ; for through that diversity alone can we hope to gain a realisation of His character wide enough to satisfy the needs of all mankind. Unity in the common service of the common Master

between the fellow-members of His Catholic Church is a paramount necessity; uniformity in approach would destroy all hope of comprehensiveness.

REPENTANCE

If once we recognise this clear-cut distinction between the self-centred and the other-centred life as the basis of Christ's message, repentance, which Christ laid down as the starting-point of the Christian life, recovers its primary meaning as a change of heart, the turning away from the self-centred way to follow the way of love. Regarded simply as regret for past misdeeds it is destructive of energy and sterile. It inhibits action, and quickly reduces the penitent to a state of self-distrust which makes whole-hearted activity impossible. Experience proves only too clearly that we can never escape the thraldom of evil habit by setting ourselves directly to resist it. The very force of our effort concentrates our thoughts on it and in a very short time we begin to dwell on the pleasures to be derived from it. If we do succeed in overcoming it, we do so only at the cost of falling into the still worse snares of self-righteousness and pride. But repentance does not stop at regret; once we have rejected the way of self we have to throw our energies into the way of love; in the joy of that love we no longer want to sink back into the loneliness of self-interest; in love for Christ, the habit that bars our progress loses its power to attract us.

In these anxious days, God is calling us anew to centre our lives on Christ. By every means in our power we must strive to draw ever closer to Christ in love. By living more and more continuously in the conscious presence of Christ; by constantly talking to Him in prayer freely and intimately as we talk to a friend we trust; by checking our every word and thought and act by the light of His presence; by seeing the friends we love as His gift to us reflecting the personality of Christ the perfect man, shining in and through them; by welcoming all that wins our admiration as the call of the Holy Spirit revealing to us Christ's love; by recognising all we come in contact with as His friends, dear to Him, whom He is relying upon *us* to lead on to respond to His love. By such means we shall spread abroad, whatever our vocation may be, the atmosphere of peace and joy and love, which is the spontaneous consequence of a Christ-centred life. All of us yearn for sympathy and goodwill. The man who possesses them will infallibly draw others to him, for it is the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit.

HOW THINGS WORK IN PRACTICE

You will perhaps want to know how this works out in practice. I can only tell you my own experience for what it is worth. If you ask me what I have been actually doing, I am afraid the only answer is that I've been doing very little. I have not started any new fellowship or society or anything. For a long time I tried to get a Fellowship going in my own College which should be a band of friends united together with Christ as the chief friend. It worked quite well up to about a dozen members, but it always collapsed when we tried to expand further. About two years ago I suddenly realised that what was wrong was that I was trying to force Christianity into my own particular mould, instead of letting God form His own mould. So I scrapped all organisation and just tried to get into contact with as many individuals as possible and apply the principle of Christ-centredness to their problems. As a result I found I was no longer working alone; we became a community; people brought their problems and those problems did find their solution in the light of love for Christ. The people did find a new happiness and a new purpose in life and in their turn started doing the same for others.

We are now becoming a much happier family and that atmosphere of good will and fellowship centred on Christ is spreading through the whole College and not merely being restricted to a few chosen folk. Obviously war-conditions and all sorts of things have aided this, but it is very remarkable that although we senior people have actually done less directly "religious" work than in the past, and certainly none of us can claim to be responsible for it, the sense of Christian fellowship is growing very fast. One cannot but feel that the Holy Spirit is doing in his own way what I ignominiously failed to do in mine. We are a heterogeneous mob; it

works very differently in different people; we retain all sorts of differences in sect, outlook, beliefs and interests, but God is beginning to mean something real and vital to us. We have a short service in Chapel every Thursday morning followed by a communal breakfast, and the numbers steadily grow. Last year I started to try and expand beyond the College and wrote to various old members of the College and other friends of mine about the same Christ-centred type of life. I based it on a league of prayer scheme in which I tried to get people to treat Christ as a confidant to whom one could freely confide just what one felt—in fact to get them to talk to Christ as they do to each other. Here again the result was the same. It produced new life and hope and purpose; but as a league of prayer, a separate entity (so to speak), it failed ignominiously. In part that was, no doubt, my fault because I did not write enough and so did not keep in touch, but in the main it did produce loyalty to the Church (in its widest sense) and not to the league of prayer, to Christ not to me.

So, you see, I cannot claim to have *done* anything. But through it God does seem to be working His own purpose out, and two things have become abundantly clear. First, the clear-cut distinction between the other-centred and the self-centred line of living, leading up to its culmination in love for Christ does solve problems and produce fresh life and hope and creative activity and does last. I have seen this in Hoxton boys, in Cambridge undergraduates, in the individual and in the family, both among Christian folk and in the case of wrong-doers. If once one ceases to be wrapped up in self and looks at others as one looks at one's own best friends, the problems become no longer insoluble, and if one treats Christ with the same confidence as one treats ones earthly friends, He does respond. That is to say the analogy between the best earthly love and the relationship of man to God does abundantly hold true. Secondly, that relationship once seen and accepted, must grow in its own way and along the lines suited to the individual temperament. One cannot canalise the fresh life to suit one's particular hobby. Yet we can be content to work together and cease to regard each others views as dangerous and diabolical. We realise there is truth in all of them and seek to see that truth in each other rather than try and force each other to accept our point of view. In other words I believe Christianity produces the outlook and atmosphere and mutual trust in which problems—individual, social, national, international—can be discussed and solved. Experts are still essential to produce the solutions, but it is the creative atmosphere of the Christ-centred life, which all of us have our part in fostering, which alone can provide the inspiration that the experts must have in order to do their work.

Yours very sincerely,

EDWARD E. RAVEN

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